

Duck season, wabbit reason

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

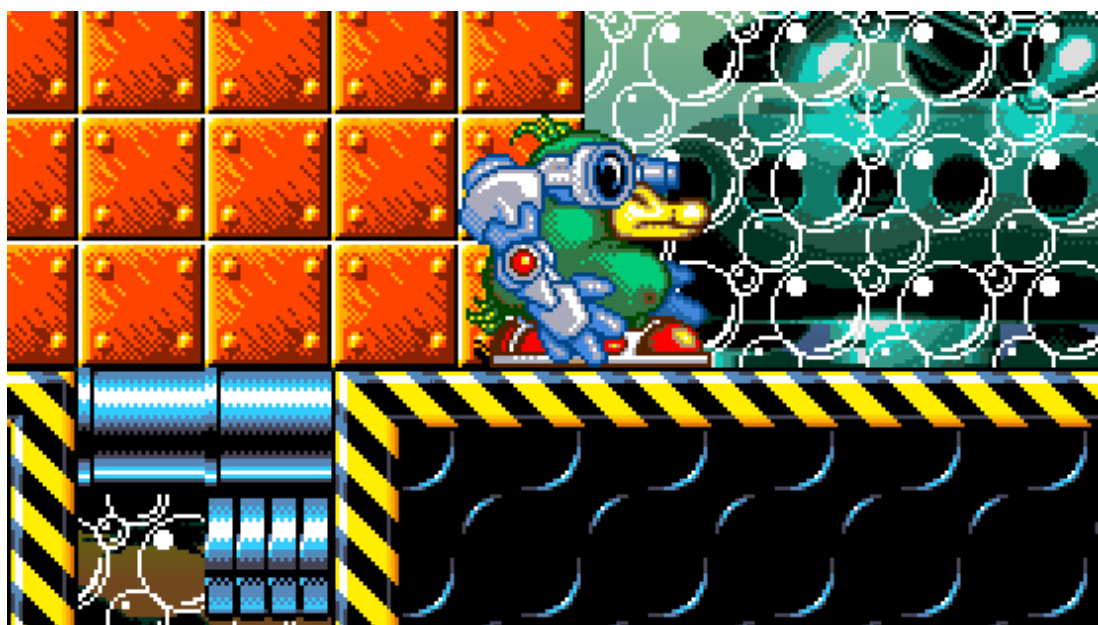
None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

When Amiga Power reviewed Donk - formerly known as *Dong* - they spent half of the two-page article discussing its packaging and how to boot the game to subtly plug the gaping voids around the images. You see, it's a pretty basic platformer with not a lot to distinguish it from the crowd besides the goofy, yet intriguing main sprite. Plus, by 1993 anything not yet said about the creaky, long in the tooth genre probably wasn't worth saying.

Why you'd expect *this* article to fare much better is anyone's guess, but we'll plod on regardless and see where the samurai quacker leads us. Yes, *that's* the premise, as explained only in the manual. We play as a duck who just so happens to be a samurai warrior thanks to the nurturing tutelage of his wise old sensei, Spidore. Discovered on an earthling riverbank Donk's tentative survival rested on Spidore's appetite for crispy Cantonese duck and empathy

for ugly ducklings with pitiful doe eyes and a whimpering quack. As it turned out he wasn't that peckish after all.

With Donk's training complete, Spidore embarks on what he expects to be his final quest, leaving his protege at home on his lonesome to amuse himself.



Spidore's arch-enemy Eider Down has discovered that the balance of the earth's fragile atmosphere is being sustained by the existence of precious gemstones hidden deep within an unknown planet. Thus, for the usual nefarious purposes, he sets out to locate and meddle with them. Splinter (I mean *Spidore*), however, has other plans, so makes it his mission to intervene before the whole 'end of the world as we know it' scenario can get underway.



Even ducks understand the benefits of eiderdown

One day, Donk, being such a morally upstanding pillar of society (or perhaps just because he's bored) decides to tag along on his master's crusade. As the game's instruction manual informs us, "the legend continues...". Sorry to break your suspension of disbelief.

What most people tend to remember about Donk the duck is that he began life under a slightly different name. One with proper rudey connotations, hence the retailer-appeasing switch. Dong is the official currency of Vietnam and in some countries translates as simply "from the east". Nevertheless, here in the UK where the game would be heavily marketed, it's an obscure slang term for the male erm... appendage. Unless you're writing for the Viz comic book it's unlikely to be

the sort of image you'd want to project towards minors, so it was decided the dings would dong no more.

"Well I could lie and say that it's the oriental word for 'east', which is where we come from, but it was just that Simon had a thing against rude words so we joked around and called it (something rude) and (something even ruder). Eventually, we settled on Dong and when we started showing it to people the name just sort of stuck. Now we quite like it actually."

Craig Howard, The One issue 55 (April 1993)



This was to be just the tip of the elephant in the room (or *iceberg* for the more conventional readers among you). Donk's transformation was far from complete. The Hidden's wildfowl-based platformer was originally to be published by DMI with a halfway house price tag that wasn't quite premium rate, yet still more than you'd expect to pay for a budget title. Still, at £15.99, expectations were lower and so Donk - representing the already ten a penny 'collect object x and exit the level' genre - was looked upon far more favourably.

Had the price not already been announced when DMI went bust and Waddington subsidiary, Supervision, stepped in to save the day - raising the required investment to £26.99 - I doubt the critics would have been so hostile towards the proposition.



"We don't want people to think of it as a cheap game. As far as we're concerned it's the same quality, if not more so, than most £25.99 games. We've put a hell of a lot of work into it and there's a hell of a lot of game in there. We didn't sit down to write a Shareware game that got elaborated on. We settled on the £15.99 price because we wanted the game to be seen by as many people as possible. Maybe instead of paying £25.99 for another

game you could go out and get this and a curry instead. You'd enjoy it all the more then."

Craig Howard, The One issue 55 (April 1993)

Supervision Entertainment I gather felt the steep price hike was justified owing to the main sprite's overhaul, and addition of a split-screen two-player option, mirroring the one found in Sonic II. Thanks to the release of two different, early preview demos distributed via cover-disk by Amiga Power and Amiga Format it's possible to compare and contrast the retail version of Donk to The Hidden's original *vision*. I'll let you decide if the new publisher made him *Super*.



I *could* document every last tweak in minute detail, except regular reader, Gzegzolka, has already done a sterling job over on the Polska Portal Amigowy forum. I can't compete with that so will take Homer's sagely advice and not even bothering trying.

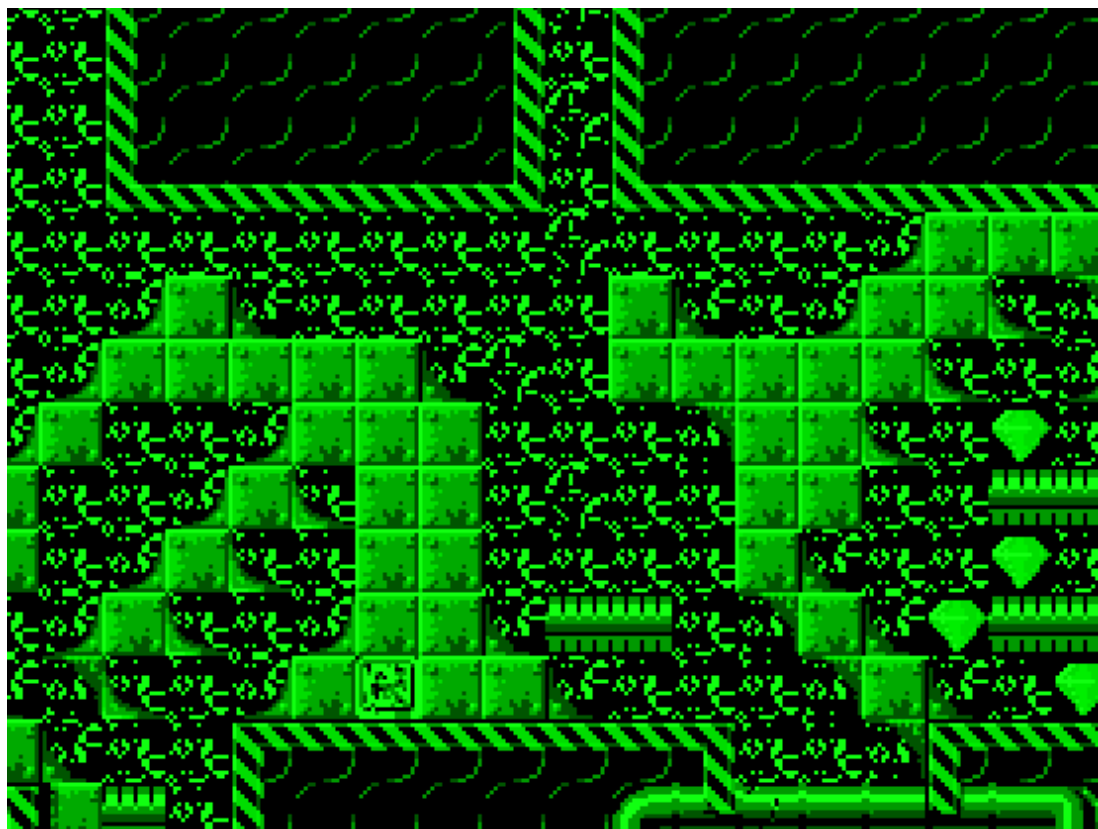
It's written in Polish of course, but Google Translate makes a commendable effort to decipher the extremely comprehensive article for an English audience. Loaded with preview screenshots too, it's worth checking out regardless of any language barriers.



What ultimately hit the shelves is certainly value for money if longevity is the only factor under consideration. Clocking in at 112 levels split across 2000 screens and 7 worlds it's a real behemoth of a trip down the rabbit hole. Especially for a duck as they're not normally known for their subterranean activity.

Further extending the marathon, it's possible to select your own non-linear route via a Mario style map, although TMNT seems to have played a more significant role in its design. Aesthetically it offers no improvement over the first NES

Turtles game, unintentionally preparing the player for something on par with a PD title!



Analogously, once the core game begins we find that *multiple* exits transport us to the next level, and how we approach gathering up the obligatory collectables is also at your discretion. This adds a layer of extra tactical complexity, while offering some scope for improving your performance.

There's no way you could hope to ever complete Donk in one sitting, even taking into account its generous offer of infinite continues, which is why it desperately needed an option to save your game at any time. A welcome surprise then to discover that it comes equipped with a flexible save feature that can be called upon at *almost* any time, as long as you're currently on the map screen.

So it's entirely possible to reach the end in *theory*, but does anyone out there have the patience and perseverance to make it happen? Not *many* it would seem. Certainly, no-one has recorded the feat and uploaded it to YouTube for posterity so far.

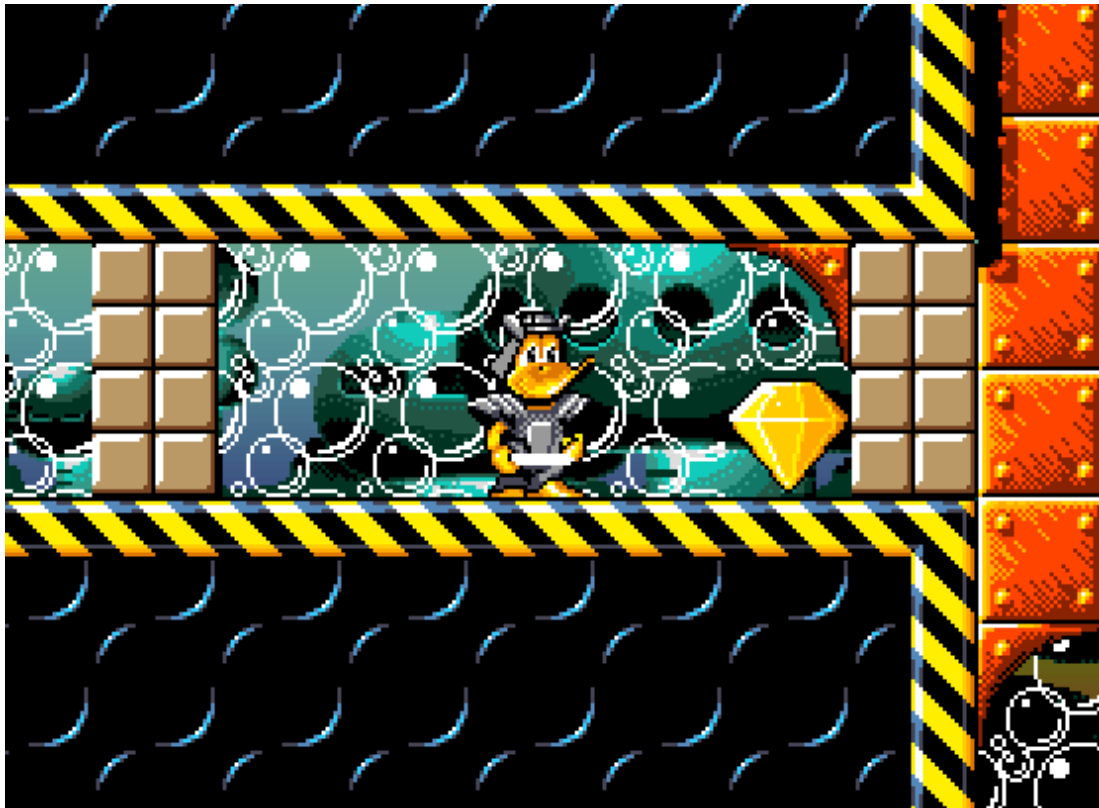
Had the level design been a bit more imaginative we may have stood a greater chance of seeing how the Duck Tales unfold. A-wooo-ooh. Partly what would neuter any attempts to pull it off is the obligation to collect a predetermined number of power crystals (labelled 'stars' in the demo's status bar, nitpicking fans) in order to exit the 15 levels. That's aside from the 6 keys required to gain access to Eider Down's castle lair.

Upon collecting the last gemstone an alarm sounds and the screen turns crimson as if switching to Nintendo Virtual Boy vision mode and you have 90 seconds to fumble around in the gloom to find the exit before you self destruct.



Assuming one of the 60 different enemy types doesn't get you first. This is why it pays to find the exit first, leave a few

gems uncollected in the vicinity and return for them later when you've grabbed all the others.



Donk supports a useful menu screen toggle that allows you to switch the function of the fire button from the default power-up selection mode to jump, no doubt earning them the console gamers' seal of approval. Another welcome addition is the simultaneous presence of music and sound effects.

The Hidden - a former PD game outfit comprising Norfolkins Craig Howard, William Bell, and Simon Leggett - also went the extra mile to lend Donk some personality-building idle animation. Leave him alone momentarily and he'll twitch and blink - a bit like Ryu with nervous ticks - to convince us he's a real creature, and not a dumb clump of pixels hibernating in lieu of our next command.

Flowing against the tide, Donk's transfer to the CD32 brought with it a fair few improvements. Running a CD-based Amiga

you'll experience an enhanced 256 colour palette, parallax scrolled prettier backdrops, an improved map screen and redesigned levels to eliminate dead ends and bottomless pits. With all that extra storage capacity to exploit we were also treated to a CD-quality soundtrack and atmospheric intro and between level animation sequences.



Playing head to head with a human is an option regardless of your hardware, although only in the CD32 version do you get the chance to play as a unique sprite. In the floppy incarnation, Donk faces off against Donk, which is just *blinking* weird if you ask me. Whether competing for crystals and racing to the exits, or working together cooperatively, your partner will forevermore be known as 'Judo Juggs'. Away

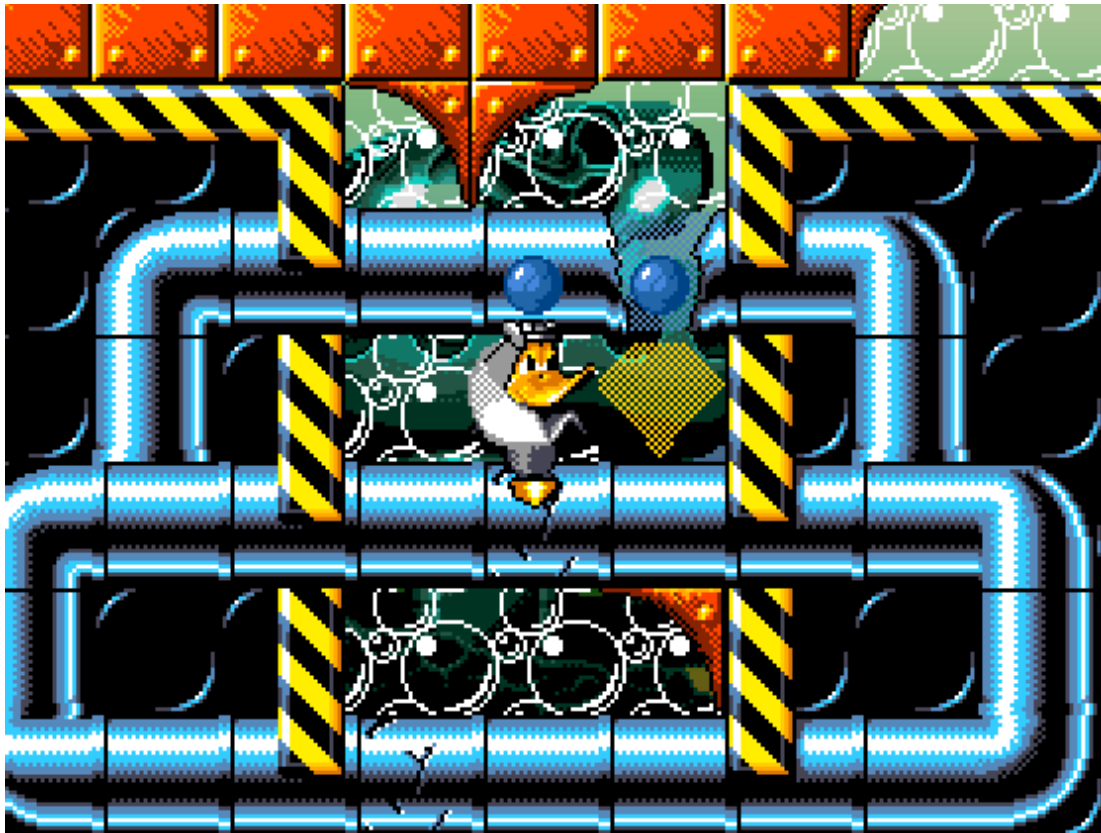
from the screen and *on* it. We get no explanation as to who he is, or what role he plays in any of the eggstraordinary challenges Donk encounters. Then again, can anyone remember Sonic sidekick Tails' heritage? I'm not sure I ever knew or cared.

Sharing a single screen isn't ideal, but then it's less frustrating and illogical than being killed by water (oh the irony!), the demands of pixel-perfect precision, and Donk's insistence on exclaiming 'hoo-ah' with every single swing of his sword. That soon wears wafer-thin unsurprisingly enough.

"What we're trying to do is keep the game going really fast and smooth in the two-player bit, which is quite hard on a normal A500. We're really chuffed with it. We tried the sprites at normal size but the play areas became so limited that the game is impossible to play. What you lose in graphic quality, you gain in playability.

At the moment the two Dong are independent. What we might have is something like Bubble Bobble where the person who gets the most stars gets a bonus. I don't think you'll be able to kick each other in or stand on each other or anything like that. It's more like a race."

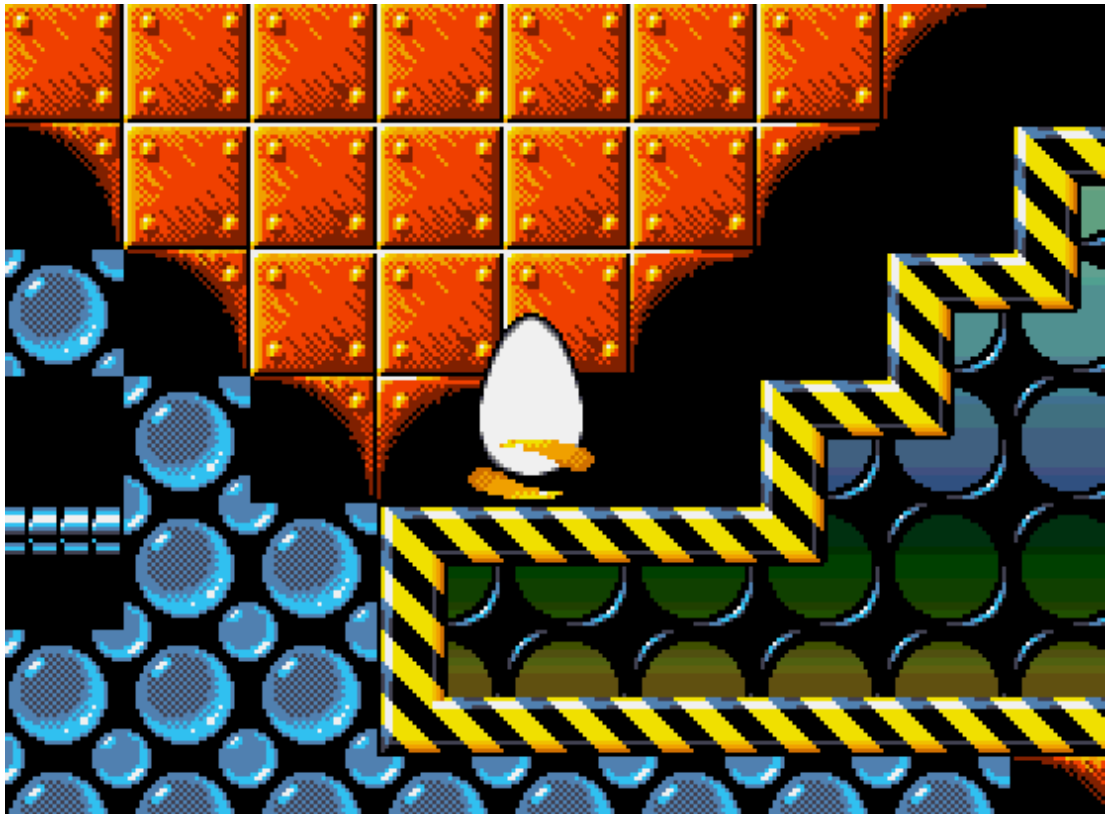
Craig Howard, The One issue 55 (April 1993)



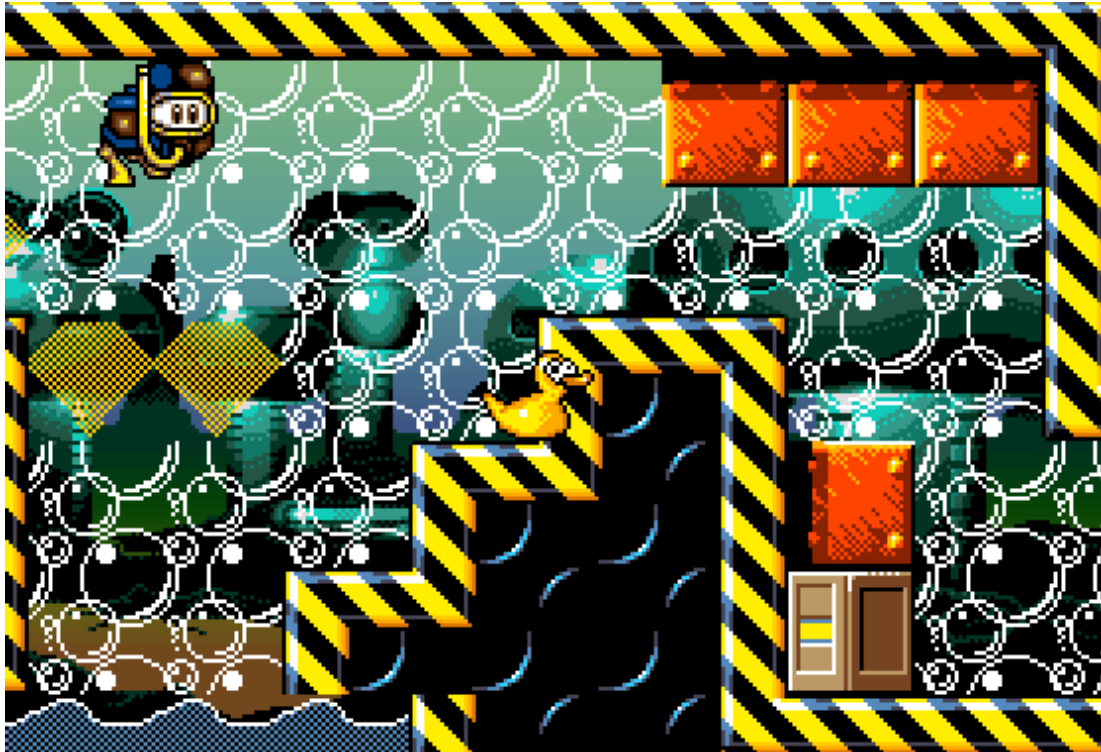
Due to the control decisions made, tying up the fire button as well as the up position, your sole attack manoeuvre is built-in to your spinning jump. As a result, you can only strike when airborne and the automation feels distinctly unsatisfying.

In fact, the whole experience smacks of budget grade emptiness, unworthy of a (failed) remake for the Dreamcast.

It's perfunctory, by the numbers platforming at best, despite the zany nuances such as Donk's egg shield...



...a black and white 'old timer' mode and rubber duck-shaped self destruct mechanism. Sadly the levels are never-endingly repetitive and the gem collecting tedious.



No wonder then that Amiga Power struggled so much to find something new to say; they didn't have a whole lot to work with. At this stage the official commemorative board game was still 20 years away, so they were snookered there too.

You'll desperately want to like Donk, because who wouldn't? He's a beguiling samurai duck with a Turtle-esque origin story dripping with oriental mystique (and *almost* sweet and sour sauce). So wot went wong?

